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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001235

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TAGS: PREL PTER PHUM MOPS PREF CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AIR FORCE ATTACKS IN THE EAST WHILE UNHCR CHIEF SEEKS TO BUILD CONFIDENCE; NORWEGIAN ENVOY COMING NEXT WEEK

REF: A. COLOMBO 1149

¶B. COLOMBO 1030 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Charge' d'Affaires. 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On the evening of July 26, the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) bombed Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) controlled areas of the eastern district of Trincomalee in an allegedly humanitarian effort to open a water supply to Tamil and Muslim civilians that the LTTE had blocked. The Air Force then bombed a suspected-LTTE airstrip in north-east Mullaitivu on July 27. These operations mark the first air raids by the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) on LTTE targets since the signing of the February 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) that were not in response to a specific LTTE provocation and occurred during a visit by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres designed to promote confidence building measures between the GSL and the Tamil population. Meanwhile, the Tiger political leadership is holding its ground on its demand that Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) members from EU-member countries (following the May 30, 2006 ban of the LTTE as a terrorist organization) be removed by September 1, and Japan may push forward with a similar listing of the LTTE. Norwegian peace envoy Hannsen-Bauer is expected next week. As international engagement mounts, the SLAF fireworks and Tiger growling illustrates no substantial change in political or military engagement between the GSL and LTTE. End summary.

Bombs for Water

¶2. (C) On the evening of July 26, according to a July 27 press statement by Ministry of Defense Spokesman Rambukwella, the Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF) conducted a "limited operation on purely humanitarian grounds" to neutralize LTTE cadres who had forcibly closed the sluice-gate of an irrigation channel providing water to government-controlled areas near Muttur in the Trincomalee district. Military Spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told emboff on July 27 that the closing of the irrigation canal affected 15,000 families and 30,000

acres of cultivable land. A pro-LTTE Tamilnet story of July 27 claimed "Tamil civilians" blocked the sluice gate to protest a delay in a GSL-planned water development project in the area. According to Samarasinghe, the GSL requested the LTTE to open the sluice gate through the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), and initiated attacks on "identified targets" only after the LTTE failed to respond positively.

¶ 13. (C) Ms. Supang, UNHCR representative in Trincomalee, told poloff she heard a loud explosion and shelling around 11 p.m. on July 26. Human Rights Commission coordinator in Trincomalee Vasantha Mathiaparanam told pol FSN the July 26 bombings had destroyed two houses, and that civilians had fled to nearby schools and other public buildings. The Trincomalee District Coordinator of the Foundation for Co-Existence, a respected Colombo think-tank, told us the Army had gained control of the area and opened the water channel following the bombing.

¶ 14. (C) Military spokesman Samarasinghe verified to emboff that a second round of airstrikes on July 27 targeted a suspected-LTTE airstrip in the northeastern area of Mullaitivu. Peace Secretary Palitha Kohona told Charge' on July 27 that "the LTTE can't just build airstrips," but seemed not to be in the loop. Norwegian Charge' Laagreid told Charge' he had been meeting with Kohona on July 26 as that day's air raids began, and that Kohona had seemed genuinely surprised by the attacks. Laagried surmised, "The hardliners are the driver's seat."

UNHCR Calls for Confidence

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¶ 15. (C) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, during a July 25-27 visit to Sri Lanka, visited a number of "front line" areas under government-control from which thousands of Sri Lankans have been displaced. He also met with LTTE political chief S.P. Tamilselvan in Kilinochchi and with several GSL officials including the President. In a press conference on July 27, Guterres asked the GSL and LTTE to act with restraint.

¶ 16. (C) During a breakfast meeting July 27 with co-chair chiefs of mission, Guterres advised that both the LTTE and the GSL seemed enthusiastic about a UNHCR "action plan" to address the root causes of "displacement" in Sri Lanka and to institute confidence-building measures in Tamil areas under government control in the north and east. In broad terms, Guterres said he had found both sides "very happy" and cooperative on "strict UNHCR issues," but that he was deeply concerned about the lack of a tangible peace process, a situation that had the potential to increase both IDP and refugees flows in the future. Guterres said he had told Tamilselvan that the LTTE was living in the past. Now it is a new world in which "liberation movements can't act like they used to" and still expect sympathy from the world community. Guterres said that his recommendation that the Tigers "go the extra mile" and get back to the peace table had been roundly rejected by Tamilselvan who reiterated the now-familiar Tiger line that nothing was possible until the GSL lived up to its obligations under the CFA and those made at the "Geneva I" talks. That said, Guterres commented, he had no sense that the Tigers were looking to go back to full-scale war.

¶ 17. (C) Guterres shared his impression that the major priority is for the GSL to develop a sense of confidence among Tamils and Muslims in government-controlled areas that the government cares about them and is committed to their welfare. He noted in particular that he had been struck in his conversations with Tamils in the Trincomalee area that they were "genuinely stuck." They do not want to cross over to LTTE areas but they are tired of harassment and abuse from the military and the police. In particular, Guterres said he

was concerned that the situation around Trincomalee could result in "Bosnia-fication" in which small enclaves, hostile to one other, become the norm. Building trust and confidence between the people and the government in such areas would be a key element of the action plan the UNHCR has in mind. Guterres commented that what UNHCR is proposing in order to "act on displacement, not just on IDPs once they start to move," could potentially be a model for other countries such as Colombia where UNHCR is faced with "large IDP populations in the midst of complicated, challenging situations."

¶8. (C) Guterres, who was headed after breakfast to a second meeting with President Rajapaksa to report on his trip to the north, said that both the GSL and the LTTE seemed committed to the UNHCR effort but that he fully understood that "if we go forward, the devil will be in the details. Can local level commanders be made to do things they might not want to do?" Guterres commented that he had been very impressed with the commitment to developing confidence-building mechanisms and in improving security force behavior demonstrated by Minister for Human Rights and Disaster Management Mahinda Samarasinghe who had initiated the contacts with Guterres in Geneva that led to the visit.

Comings, Goings and Talking Sense

¶9. (C) British Deputy High Commissioner Lesley Craig told Charge' she will meet with Tamilselvan in Kilinocchi July 28 on behalf of the EU, to discuss the ban on the Tigers and options for political engagement with the European community.

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Norwegian special envoy Jon Hannsen Bauer will visit Sri Lanka next week and plans to visit Tiger-controlled Kilinocchi at least once during his approximately 10-day visit which will focus on the EU/SLMM issue and on restarting the larger peace process. Last week Swedish envoy Anders Oljelund met with LTTE political leader Tamilselvan to address the Tigers demand for removal of EU-citizen monitors in the SLMM. Norwegian Charge' Laagreid described the Swedish effort to Charge' July 27 as entirely predictable: Oljelund emphasized to Tamilselvan that monitors represent the SLMM, not their respective governments, but Tamilselvan simply listened politely then said there would be no change in the Tigers' position.

¶10. (C) Japanese special envoy Yasushi Akashi plans to visit Sri Lanka in August contingent upon a meeting with Prabhakaran, according to press reports. The Japanese DCM confirmed to Charge' July 27 that Akashi had requested a meeting with LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, and that the Japanese were considering listing the Tigers as a terrorist organization. Akashi told New Delhi-based IANS television on July 24: "I would like to convey (to Prabhakaran) that the Japanese government... is seriously considering tangible measures as some other governments have taken. Only Prabhakaran can take the most difficult decisions (for the LTTE)." In the same interview, Akashi urged the LTTE to reverse its decision on the EU/SLMM issue.

Comment

¶11. (C) Comment. In the midst of half-hearted adherence to the CFA by both parties, UNHCR has an ambitious "action plan" (faxed to the desk) to address the causes of displacement in Sri Lanka and try to reduce the flows. Hopefully, it is a concept that the U.S. can support. High Commissioner Guterres is correct, however, that it may be a hard sell to the security forces even if President Rajapaksa is enthusiastic. As we have reported before, Human Rights Minister Samarasinghe indeed seems genuinely committed to improving both security force behavior and improving conditions in Tamil and Muslim areas. Equally genuine, however, is the reluctance of some in the government and

security forces to implement such programs despite any positive message that may be coming from the President and others at the top.

¶12. (C) Essentially, the Guterres visit has served to reinforce themes that we and others have been making to the government for some months. We intend to tell the government that UNHCR has a good (if not new) idea and that the government needs to take it seriously and work to improve the lives of Tamils and Muslims in the North and the East if it is to effectively undercut LTTE influence over these populations. Unfortunately, the latest airstrikes by the GSL with, in our view, their somewhat shaky justification, could well make mutual confidence an even more fleeting goal. In the meantime, we hope - but do not expect - the Brits, Norwegians and Japanese to be able to talk some sense into the Tigers on the SLMM issue. End comment.

ENTWISTLE